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**A**s a young shipfitter, I would pass fire watches sitting in a corner of a ship, propped against a bulkhead, watching a welder work his magic. I'd think to myself, "One day, I'll get a chance to have a nice easy job like that. What can be hard about sitting and watching for flames?"

That day finally came for me when a ship needed some stiffeners welded to a bulkhead. I went down to the fire-watch shack, signed in, gave the location of the hot-work, inspected the fire bottle, got my gear (goggles, fire-watch badge, and hot-work chit), and off I went.

At the job site, I checked the area for flammable materials and made sure no one was spray painting. I then checked the date on the gas-free tag for currency and made sure the work was

authorized. I also went to the space on the other side of the job site to make sure it was clear. *[As directed by the Code of Federal Regulations, a fire watch must have ready access to the other side of a bulkhead during welding operations. If he doesn't, another fire watch is required.—Ed.]* Everything was good to go, so the welder set up to do his part of the job, but he first checked the area one last time for himself.

Once he started, I moved behind him to avoid the direct rays. I was sitting there in a daze, thinking all was OK, when I suddenly smelled cotton burning. I looked down and saw that an errant spark had ignited the welder's pant legs. With heart pounding and adrenaline pumping, I jumped to my feet and discharged the fire extinguisher at the flames.

## Fire Watches Mundane? *I Don't Think So*



A fire watch stands ready as a welder does his job.

Immediately, the welder stood up and asked, "What the (expletive deleted) are you doing?"

I pointed to the back of his coveralls. Because he was wearing thick denim pants and coveralls, high-top boots, and thick socks, he hadn't felt the heat from the flames. I thought I had done all the right things.

Afterward, however, I realized I had gotten too relaxed with my job. I took it for granted I was safe because I had done everything right, but I was wrong.

There's nothing "easy" about the task of a fire watch. It's an important link in the safety chain, and you have to pay attention all the time. ■